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A Matter of Mindset: The Benefit of a Growth Mindset After a Career Shock

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ABSTRACT

The COVID pandemic has created a career shock felt around the world. This study examines the negative effect the pandemic has had on an individual's career perception, career satisfaction, and career choice commitment. Using a cross-sectional design and a sample of 112 individuals working in the hospitality and tourism industry, findings indicate that the pandemic has had a significant negative influence on an individual's career perception, career satisfaction, and career choice commitment. Furthermore, an individual's mindset moderates this relationship such that those with a growth mindset (i.e., those who feel things can change through effort) indicated a less negative career perception and career choice satisfaction than those individuals with a more entity mindset (i.e., those who feel things cannot change through effort). These results suggest that cultivating a growth mindset could be an important factor in successfully responding to a career shock and possibly, in general, more resilient in times of uncertainty.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant negative impact on the lives of many people from around the world. As the world emerges from the pandemic the changes it will cause are still unfolding. Research in all fields have focused on understanding the wide ramifications of this historical event. In business, many studies have focused on working remotely and the challenges it creates in how work gets done (e.g., van Zoonen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Furthermore, researchers are just starting to examine how the disruption of the pandemic has effect career development and possibly career choices (e.g., Reichenberger & Raymond, 2021; Benaraba et al., 2022). The COVID pandemic was clearly a disruptive shock to the careers of many. This creates a

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significant challenge to those in the field of employment counseling and in general to the career progress of many.

The degree of disruption is likely due to contextual and individual factors (Akkermans et al., 2020). This study focuses on the role individual's mindset (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) may have had as a mitigating factor. Specifically, I focus on how the covid pandemic has influenced the career perception, career choice satisfaction, and career choice commitment to individuals at the early stage of their careers. In addition, I examine how their mindset, that is their belief in the malleability of human attributes, may reduce the negative impact of the pandemic. A large body of research in the field of business (e.g., Han & Stieha, 2020), psychology (Yeager & Dweck, 2020), and education (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015) have established the benefit of a growth mindset, believing attributes can be changed through effort. The benefits of more of a growth mindset include improve response to setbacks or trauma (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988) as well as possible reduced anxiety (Schroder et al., 2017) in the face of uncertainty. It is possible that those with a growth mindset successfully coped with the disruption the pandemic had on their career development more than this who a fixed mindset (i.e., attributes cannot be changed through effort).

This study could have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically it can add to the extensive body of literature demonstrating the benefit of a growth mindset (see Dweck & Yeager, 2019 or Han & Stieha, 2020, for review). In addition, it can add to the literature regarding how individual differences can influence the consequences of career shocks (e.g., Seibert et al., 2013; Baruch & Lavi-Steiner, 2015). Practical implications could include the benefit of trying to cultivate a growth mindset during employment counseling or career development in general. Furthermore, it could highlight the value of a growth mindset during other times of high uncertainty, such as during organizational change.

This paper is outlined as follows. Next, I will discuss the negative relationship be the disruption of the pandemic and career perspective, career choice satisfaction and career choice commitment. Then how this relationship could be moderated by individual's mindset. This will be followed by a review of the study design used to test this study hypothesis. Finally, I will review the results and implications of the study's findings.

Hypothesis development

The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic can be directly measured through economic fallout and indirectly through the mental and psychological toll it has had on many. Although the COVID pandemic has affected all industries (Maital & Barzani, 2020), there are some variations in the extent to which the industry was affected (Roy, 2020). Those in education had to deal with the added stress of switching to an online format (e.g., Tarkar, 2020; Onyema et al., 2020). The medical industry had to deal with work overload with an increase in hospital admissions (e.g., Bhandari et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021). The hospitality and tourism industry had to handle a severe drop in business from limitations placed on travel (Collins-Kreiner, & Ram, 2020).

Within an industry we also so variations in impact. Those at both the beginning of their careers and those at the end of their careers face difficult but different challenges. Those at the end of their career experience a significant setback at a vital time where they should be preparing for retirement.

On the other hand, those individuals just entering or about to enter their chosen field also experience a disruption at a vital time.

In particular, at the very early stage of their career they should be focusing on gathering experience and determine what career paths to choose. The setback of not being able to acquire any first-hand experience can have a negative impact on how they view their future career path. A rapidly growing body of research has already begun to establish the negative effect the pandemic has on individuals and in particular the feelings towards their professional future (Akkermans et al., 2020; Reichenberger & Raymond, 2021) Furthermore, this can cause them to regret their career choice leading them to second guess this decision. Formally stated as:

Hypothesis 1: Perception of COVID disruption is negatively related to career perception (Hypo 1a), choice satisfaction (Hypo 1b) and choice commitment (Hypo 1 c).

Even though, in general, individuals were negatively affected by the pandemic, individual differences across the population has led to differences in the impact felt by the pandemic (Ceccato et al., 2021). One such individual difference that can help reduce the negative impact is an individual's mindset. Individuals differ in their mindset, which is their belief in the malleability of individual attributes. One side of the continuum is a fixed mindset, those they feel attributes cannot be changes. On the other end is a growth mindset, those attributes can be changed through effort (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). An Individual's mindset has been found to influence individual's motivations and behavioral responses (Dweck, 1999).

Specifically, individuals with a more growth mindset have been found to respond to failure or setbacks with increased effort and persistence (Tabernero & Wood, 1999). In addition, they tend to accept opportunities to learn after a setback and make upward comparisons to assist with the learning process (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008). Furthermore, a more growth mindset has been shown to reduce anxiety associated with stressful events (Schroder et al., 2017) and support general psychological wellbeing (Burnette et al., 2022).

In contrast, those with a more fixed mindset poorly respond to a setback or failure as they feel the situation cannot be changed through effort. In addition, when given a choice they will pursue opportunities in a different area they have not encounter a setback in before. Furthermore, those with a more fixed mindset experience more anxiety after a stressful event and (Schroder et al., 2017) may be more prone to experience anxiety over time (Schroder et al., 2019).

Therefore, because those with a more growth mindset remains persistent after a setback and experience less anxiety after stressful life events it is likely the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on individual's career perception is less for those who have a more growth mindset. Whereas the negative effects of the pandemic are likely stronger for those with a more fixed mindset. Formally stated as:

Hypothesis 2: Relationship between covid disruption and career perception (Hypo 2a), choice satisfaction (Hypo 2b) and choice commitment (Hypo 2c) is moderated by individual's mindset. Such that the relation is weaker when the individual has more of a growth mindset and stronger when they have more of a fixed mindset.

Method

Procedure

A cross-sectional survey design was used to test this study hypotheses. Survey participants were gathered through a local university located in an urban tourist destination. Additional participants were gathered through the author's relationships in the local business community.

Sample

Data was collected from individuals whose primary employment was in the service industry and worked at least 30 hours a week. Overall, 130 completed the online survey with 112 completing all, for a completion rate of 86.2%. Of the remaining 112 participants, 51% were male and 57% were Caucasian. The average age of the participants was 24.5 years. Lastly, the participants had an average of 4.1 years of work experience in the hospitality and tourism industry.

Measures

COVID disruption: four items measuring event disruption originally developed by Morgeson (2005) and adapted for the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Liu et al., 2021; Lin et al, 2021; Yin & Ni, 2021) were used. Individuals responded on a 5-point Likert Scale. I averaged the items, such that a higher score indicates a more significant disruption ($\alpha = .74$).

Individual mindset: I used the eight-item domain general kind of person scale (Dweck, 2000). Individuals responded to each item using a 6-poinnt Likert scale. I averaged the items, such that a higher score indicates a more growth mindset ($\alpha = .82$).

Career perception: Three items from Benaraba et al. (2022). Individuals responded on a 5-point Likert Scale. I averaged the items, such that a higher score indicates a more positive career perspective ($\alpha = .72$).

Career choice satisfaction: Was measure with a single item "I am satisfied with my choice to pursue a career in hospitality and tourism'. Individuals responded on a Likert scale from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Career choice commitment: Was measure with a single item "I am committed to pursuing a career in hospitality and tourism industry". Individuals responded on a Likert scale from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Analyses

To test this study's hypothesis hierarchical regression was used. Career perceptions, career choice satisfaction, and career choice commitment were used as the dependent variables. In the first step, the control variable of work experience was entered. In the second step perception of COVID disruption was entered (Hypo 1). In the third step, individuals' mindset, and interaction of mindset and COVID disruption was entered (Hypo 2).

Results

Table 1 includes descriptive statistics for and correlations between all study variables. Participant's perception of disruption for the pandemic was negatively correlated with their career perception (*r*

= -.23, $p < .01$), career satisfaction ($r = -.20$, $p < .01$), and career choice commitment ($r = -.18$, $p < .05$). Individual's growth mindset was positively related to their career perception ($r = .71$, $p < .01$) and career satisfaction ($r = .73$, $p < .01$) but not their commitment to their career choice ($r = .15$, *n.s.*).

Table 1.

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Career perception	3.51	1.09					
2. Career choice satisfaction	3.48	1.10	.80**				
3. Career choice commitment	3.39	0.81	.10	.12			
4. Participant mindset	3.63	1.20	.71**	.73**	.15		
5. COVID disruption	4.00	0.72	-.23*	-.20*	-.18*	-.04	
6. Industry experience	4.18	3.32	-.03	-.20	-.12	-.22*	-.04

Note. N = 112.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Hypothesis 1 predicts that individuals who perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as more disruptive would, in turn, have a more negative career perception (Hypo 1a), indicate less satisfaction in their career choice (Hypo 1b), and be less committed to the career choice (Hypo 1 c).

Table 2.

Regression analyses predicting dependent variables

	Career Perception		Career choice satisfaction		Career choice commitment	
Variable	*ß*	*t*	*ß*	*t*	*ß*	*t*
Step 1						
Industry experience	-.03	-.28	-.02	-.26	-.12	-1.24
ΔR^2	.01		.01		.01	
Step 2						
Industry experience	.13	1.92	.13	-2.94*	-.10	-1.04
Participant mindset	.73	9.19***	.75	11.82**	.12	1.27
COVID disruption	-.19	-2.97**	-.18	-2.94**	-.18	-1.97*
ΔR^2	.56***			.58***	.05	
Step 3						
Industry experience	.11	1.70	.12	1.84	-.11	-1.19
Participant mindset	-.07	-.17	-.01	-.04	-.67	-1.16
COVID disruption	-.60	-2.89**	-.58	-2.85	-.59	-1.19
Participant mindset x COVID disruption	.89*	2.07*	.85	2.04*	.88	1.39
ΔR^2	.02*		.02*		.02	

Note. N = 112.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

As shown in Table 2, those who perceived a stronger disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic had a significantly more negative career perception (β = -.19, p < .01), were less satisfied with their career choice (β = -.18, p < .01), and less committed to career choice (β = -.18, p < .01). Therefore, Hypothesis 1a, 1b, and 1 c were all supported.

Hypothesis 2 stated that an individual's mindset would moderate the negative relationship between perceived COVID disruption and career perception, career choice satisfaction, and commitment to career choice. Especially, for those with a more growth mindset this relationship would be less negative than those with a more fixed mindset. As shown in Table 2, the interaction term was significant for career perception (β = .89, p < .05) and career choice satisfaction (β = .85, p < .05). However, the interaction term was not significant for career choice commitment (β = .88, *n.s.*). Next, I calculated the predictive values for career perspective and career choice satisfaction for individuals with a more growth mindset (1 standard deviation above the mean) and those with a more fixed mindset (1 standard deviation below the mean).

Figure 1.

Relationship between COVID disruption and career perception for those with a growth mindset and those with a fixed mindset

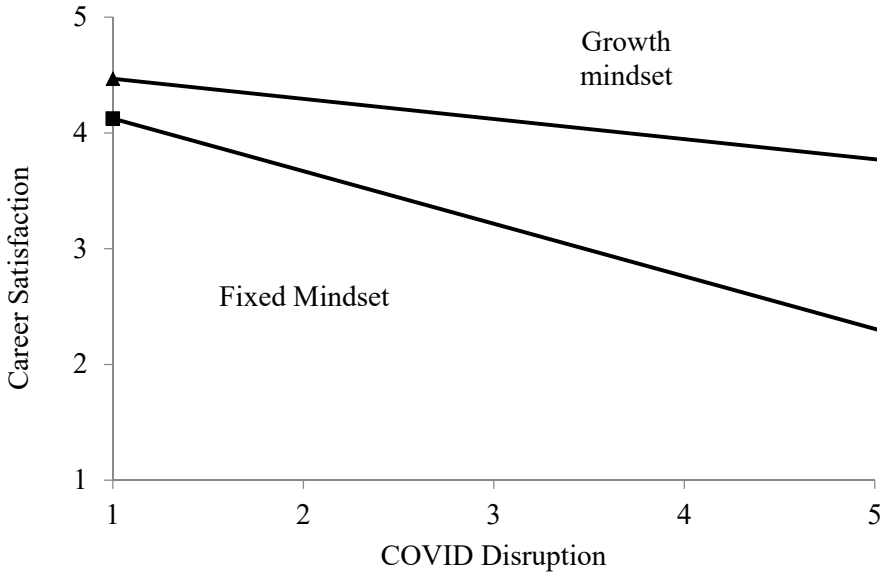
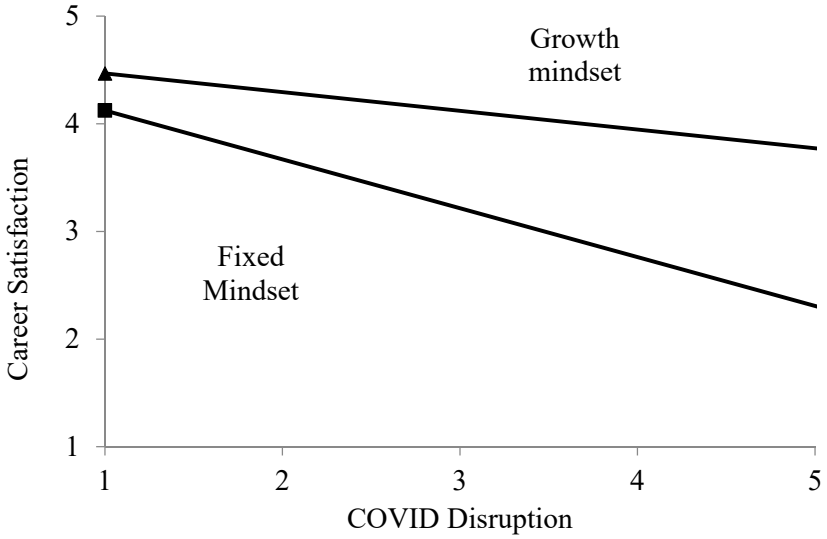


Figure 2.
Relationship between COVID disruption and career satisfaction for those with a growth mindset and those with a fixed mindset



As shown in figure 1 (Hypo 2a) and figure 2 (Hypo 2b), the relationship between Covid disruption and career perception and career choice satisfaction are less negative when an individual has a more growth mindset than a more fixed mindset. Overall, I found support for Hypothesis 2a and 2b, but hypothesis 2c was not supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between COVID disruption and individual's career perception, career choice satisfaction, and career choice commitment. Furthermore, if this relationship is influenced by an individual's mindset. I found that perceived disruption from COVID does have a significant negative effect on career perception and career choice satisfaction. However, I did not find support for a relationship with career choice commitment. Furthermore, individual's mindset does moderate the relationship between COVID disruption and career perception and career choice satisfaction, such that the negative relationship was less for those with a more growth mindset compared to those with a more fixed mindset. Once again there was no significant relationship regarding career choice commitment.

Overall, the findings suggest that the disruption of the COVID pandemic has negatively impacted individual's career perception and how satisfied they are with the career choice. Furthermore, this negatively relationship is reduced for those individuals with a more growth mindset. However, this relationship holds for feelings and beliefs (i.e., career perception and career choice satisfaction) but does not hold for behavioral intentions (i.e., career choice commitment). This finding supports the idea that a career disruption can have different effect on the short term (i.e., feelings toward career perspective and satisfaction) and long-ten outcomes such as changing careers (i.e., career commitment) (Akkermans et al., 2020).

Implications and future research

This study has both theoretical and practical implications. First, it adds to research about career shock and the interaction with individual differences (e.g., Seibert et al., 2013; Baruch & Lavi-Steiner, 2015). Furthermore, it adds to research that examines events as an interaction between contextual and individual factors as outlined in Event System Theory (Morgeson et al., 2015). Second, this study contributes to the stream of research regarding mindset. Particularly, it adds to the research showing resiliency after setback or failures for those with growth mindsets. In the case of this study the setback is a contextual event or shared trauma instead of an individual level (i.e., task failure) event. Furthermore, it adds to research examining mindset and anxiety and uncertainty. Research has found support that a growth mindset assist is managing anxiety (Schroder et al., 2017; Schroder et al., 2019). Lastly, it adds to the growing body of research examining the impact of the COVID pandemic.

These findings also have practical implications for both the field of employment counseling and business in general. For career counseling, it shows the value of trying to cultivate a growth mindset when counseling others. Research has found that a growth mindset can be cultivated through feedback and training (Heslin & VandeWalle, 2008). The combination of focusing on effort and resilience against anxiety that a growth mindset exhibits would be valuable to the challenges job seekers face as research has shown it to be valuable to coaching in general (Heslin & VandeWalle, 2008; Ozduran & Tanova, 2017). For business, the finding that a growth mindset remains resilient during a large-scale event with high uncertainty suggests the benefit of a growth mindset during organizational change as well. Research has already suggested the benefit of cultivating an organizational culture of a growth mindset (Canning et al., 2020).

Strengths, limitations

Like all studies, this study has its strength and limitations. The sample in this study was o individual's working in the hospitality and tourism industry. This allowed me to focus on one industry and one that was significantly disrupted by the COVID pandemic. Future research should examine how this relationship exists in other industries. In addition, the average work experience of the sample was 4.2 years which indicates they were mostly in the early stages of their career. Future research should examine how this relationship exists with individuals at different stages of their career. Finally, this study, I utilized a cross-sectional design. However, the effects of a career shock can be delayed and appear over time. Future research should examine this relationship in a longitudinal design to better understand the role of time in this relationship.

Conclusion

Overall, this study shows the negative effect the COVID pandemic has had on individual's career perceptions and satisfaction with career choice. More important the findings indicate that a growth mindset helps limit this negative relationship. Navigating a career during uncertain times is a daunting challenge for individuals and for those coaching or counseling them. The persistence in effort and reduce levels of anxiety demonstrated by those with a more growth mindset can add a much-needed tool to help overcome this challenge.

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